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ABSTRACT

The geography department at Mansfield State College (Pennsylvania) has maintained and even increased enrollment by expanding into a Department of Geography and Regional Planning and by offering internship programs to its students. Goals of the department are to develop special emphases in environmental planning, resource management, recreational planning and management, economic development, and a cartographic technician program. The internship program requires that each student spend an entire semester in a planning agency. Also, several of the faculty serve on local planning commissions. A number of studies including comprehensive plans, zoning ordinances, a resource management plan, recreation plans, housing surveys, market studies, income surveys, and population studies have been produced. In addition, a current travel-tourism emphasis has attracted mostly female students directly from high school. The successes of this program are attributable to merchandising, including the development of brochures, newspaper articles, and a video film. (KC)

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A P P L I E D G E O G R A P H Y
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S T A T E C O L L E G E

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APPLIED GEOGRAPHY AT A SMALL STATE COLLEGE

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Introduction

During the past decade, our colleges and universities have had to face the reality of fundamental social and economic change. Declining operating budgets and the appearance of a differently motivated student have been of most significance.[1] Many of our education institutions and their academic departments, geography included, have been unable, or have failed to adjust to these events, and their very existence is in doubt. This paper is intended to illustrate what one small geography department, in a rigid and conservative state college system in the economically hard-pressed State of Pennsylvania, has thus far done to survive.[2]

The Past and Present

Mansfield State College traces its origin back to 1857 when the Mansfield Classical Seminary opened its doors on the present site. Shortly thereafter, the Seminary experienced financial difficulties and in 1862 was taken over by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and designated a "State Normal College," and later, in 1927, a "State Teachers College." The concept and responsibilities of the College, however, were considerably broadened in 1960 when the school was given its present title, "Mansfield State College." Today, as one of Pennsylvania's 13 State Colleges, Mansfield is a four-year, co-educational, fully accredited institution consisting of two academic divisions: The College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Professional Studies. The College offers approximately 50 undergraduate degree programs and several master's programs. The current student enrollment numbers about 2,500, a slight increase over the past several years.

Although the teaching of geography at Mansfield State College has a lengthy heritage, a separate and independent Geography Department was not authorized and established until 1968. At that time, the teaching efforts of the geography faculty were largely committed to the preparation of prospective elementary and secondary school teachers. Signs were appearing even then, however, that opportunities in the teaching profession would be limited as a consequence of our Nation's falling birth rate.[3] Therefore, a thorough examination and consideration of the future direction of the Department was made. Two basic and related premises emerged: (1) that the major goal of the Department would be to present geography as a discipline with content, theory, and methodology relevant to problem-solving; and (2) the realization that this goal could not be accomplished only through courses taught within our small, five full-time faculty, Department. Specific courses and programs of other departments could compliment our own and we would, therefore, have to encourage, require, and provide opportunity for our students to work in ancillary fields.

Our deliberations, not unanimously agreed upon I might add, resulted in wide-ranging course changes and the initiation, in 1972, of a "Regional Planning" program. At the same time, in order to better identify our new directions and program to both the College Administration and prospective students, the Department's name was changed to "Department of Geography and Regional Planning," and two years ago we elected to join the newly established "School of Professional Studies."

After effecting this change in Department title and direction, there were a number of important developments, the most noteworthy of which was the successful establishment of an internship experience, in which our students are required to spend an entire semester in a planning agency. Initially, of course, it was

necessary for the Department to develop favorable relations with planning agencies throughout our region. This was accomplished, principally, by adequately preparing students to perform the internship work required. Fortunately, most of our students have been highly motivated, coming to us after a semester or two on campus[4] and, consequently, are usually more mature and responsible.

Today, our students participate in a great variety of planning internships and obtain invaluable practical experience. Many of our students, most importantly, are frequently hired by the very agency in which they complete their internship; and many of our graduates currently hold planning positions, some at a very high level (and salary) in a number of different planning agencies.[5] Several of our students, furthermore, have gone on to graduate from various graduate planning programs, including the excellent one at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Of related importance, also, has been the planning activities and accomplishments of Departmental faculty and students. For example, several of our faculty serve or have served on local planning commissions; and a number of planning studies, including comprehensive plans, zoning ordinances, a resource management plan (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers), recreation plans, housing surveys, market studies, income surveys, and population projections have been produced. All of which visibly demonstrates our academic commitment and professionalism.

The Future

The Department firmly believes that the decision made ten years ago to move in the direction of "planning" and "applied geography" was correct. Despite several years of declining College enrollments, the number of our majors has remained stable, while the number of students taking our courses has actually increased. Our majors,

in particular, appear highly satisfied and find their course work, internships, and planning employment intellectually satisfying and rewarding. Our students are also known for their ability to perform at a high level; and our program has been imitated by several of our sister institutions.

However, we do not intend, nor is it possible, to stand still and rest on our laurels. Currently, for example, we are re-thinking our planning program. Originally, its main purpose was to prepare students for an initial, non-specialized entry into a planning position. What we now need to do is to provide more specialized preparation for students who are more job-specific oriented. For instance, within the program we could develop emphases in environmental planning, resource management, recreational planning and management, economic development, and others. This could be accomplished, in part, by establishing various planning "tracks" which would use existing and additional courses and faculty in other departments.

More immediately, the Department is working to develop additional programs. We have, for example, proposed a two-year and four-year cartographic-technician program. But our most recent development, and successful implementation, has been our Geography B.A., Travel-Tourism emphasis, which is designed to prepare graduates for a career in the rapidly growing travel and tourism profession. What is perhaps most interesting about this program is that (1) it has attracted students directly into out Department from high school, and (2) it has attracted mostly females. Although only in the beginning of its second year, we now have approximately 30 new students enrolled. An important reason for the growth of this program, we believe, has been its successful merchandising. Brochures were printed and distributed, newspaper articles published, and, most significantly, a video film was prepared for showing by our admissions staff as they visit schools in their recruiting efforts.

["Travel and Tourism at Mansfield State College"
A 5 minute video tape film]

Conclusion

Our experience in "survival" enables me to make several suggestions:

1. Demonstrate to today's job-oriented students what they can do with academic training in geography. Introductory, general education courses provide a good opportunity for doing so.
2. Develop new programs and directions which provide direct employment opportunities. There are, of course, others in addition to those which we have chosen to emphasize.
3. Publicize and merchandise your program and your activities. One may feel a bit uncomfortable at first, as did I, about "tooting your own horn," but it will increase your "visibility" and can make a difference between extinction or survival. As long as you believe in yourself, your discipline, and what you are doing, merchandising is a valid and effective activity.

Besides, what is the alternative?

Footnotes

1. In a survey of 192,248 first year (fall 1981) college students, the highest rated "very important reason for going to college" was "able to get a better job" (76.3%), while "able to make more money" (60.0%) was rated second. Chronicle of Higher Education, Feb. 17, 1982, 10.

2. Kish, George and R.M. Ward, "A Survival Package for Geography and Other Endangered Disciplines," AAG Newsletter, 16, #10 (Dec. 1, 1981), 8, 14.

3. The fertility rate in the United States declined from 122.7 in 1977 to 65.7 in 1976. Since 1976, however, the fertility rate has experienced a slight, but significant (?), increase.

4. According to the same survey above (FN#1), none of the 192,248 students identified "geography" as a "probable field of study." Interestingly, the largest "probable career occupation" category selected was "undecided" (10.9%). This is the group on our campus from which many of our majors come after taking one or more of our general education courses. Thus, the need to design attractive and meaningful introductory courses.

5. Examples of some of the positions held by graduates of our Department are:

   Community Planner, Leigh-Northampton Counties
   Transportation Coordinator, Northern Tier Regional Planning and Development Commission Towanda, PA.
   Planner II, North Central Regional Development and Planning Commission Ridgway, PA.
   Development Director, Fayette County Redevelopment Authority
   Federal Railroad Administration, Washington, D.C.
   Urban Planner, Economic Development Council, Scranton, PA.
   Planner, Bucks County Planning Commission, Doylestown, PA.
   Planner, Ocean County Planning Commission, Toms River, N.J.
   Research Analyst, New Jersey Department of Transportation, Trenton, N.J.
   Planner, Michael Baker, Inc., Pittsburgh, PA.
   Land Use Management Coordinator, Lycoming County Planning Commission, Williamsport, PA.
   Planner, Carbon County Planning Commission, Carbondale, PA.
   Planner, McKean County Planning Commission, Smethport, PA.
   Planning Analyst, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Baltimore, MD.
   Transportation Planner, S.E. Philadelphia Transit Authority, Philadelphia, PA.
   Community Planner, Pennsylvania Power and Light Co., Allentown, PA.
   Director of Planning, City of Allentown, Allentown, PA.
   Planner, Urban Research and Development Corporation, Bethlehem, PA.
   Planner, Joint Planning Commission, Leigh Valley, PA.
   Environmental Planner, Rogers, Golden, and Halpern, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.
   Hydrologist, Atlantic County Planning Commission, Atlantic City, N.J.
   Marketing and Management Specialist, Hunt Engineering, Painted Post, N.Y.
   Zoning Officer, Sayre, PA.
   Planner, Susquehanna County Planning Commission, Montrose, PA.

Additional Readings

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